

“Kingdom Secrets: The Two Sons”
Matthew 21:23-32 (Luke 5:27-32)

February 28, 2021

SI: We’re studying Jesus’ kingdom parables, which he explains are the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven for believers.

In other words, these parables are about things we should understand and expect as we live in God’s invisible kingdom in this world.

I’m going to read what happened just before this parable,
and then we’ll read a passage in Luke that I’m going to use as a case study for understanding this parable.

INTRO: A well-known Christian scholar asked his class of seminary students what a town look like if it were completely controlled by the devil. They said crimes, murders, rapes, robberies, decay, weeds, trash, poverty, exploitation, despair.

When they were finished answering he said:

I think a town completely controlled by the devil would be an orderly town with lots of rules, financially prosperous, clean streets, neat yards, and every Sunday the churches would be full of people who would listen attentively to sermons in which Christ is not preached.

His point was that the thing that can most thoroughly blind people to their sinfulness and need for salvation is the order and morality of their lives.

On the other hand, oftentimes the shame of your moral failure and the despair at the wreck you've made of things saves you, because it gives you a deep-down understanding of your hopeless condition—so you cry out to God.

It's counterintuitive, but the devil can blind people spiritually with their own morality more effectively than he can with their heinous sins.

In the parable of the two sons Jesus contrasts two groups of people among the Jews.

The tax collectors and prostitutes, the chief priests and elders of the people.

In the popular mind tax collectors and prostitutes were the bottom of the barrel.

Eugene Peterson's Bible translation refers to them as crooks and whores.

That will give you a sense of the shock value of Jesus' words.

These were people who had deliberately and very visibly broken God's law.

But Jesus commends them, because when they heard John the Baptist preaching:

“Behold the Lamb of God who takes away sins of world, repent and believe”

They confessed their sins. They clung to the mercy of God in the Messiah.

The visible, humiliating nature of their sins destroyed their self-righteousness, so when they heard the good news of God's forgiveness through Christ, they responded with repentance

Like the son in the parable, they said no to God at first, but then they said yes to God in repentance and got eternal life.

The other group is the religious leaders. The chief priests and the elders.

These would have been the Sadducees and the Pharisees.

They knew God's law to the letter and placed great emphasis on following it.

They stressed outward behavior and keeping the many rules of Judaism.

In another place the New Testament tells us they were so strict about tithing

that they even tithed their spices.

The impression they made on anyone who met them was that they were serious about obeying the Bible and obeying God.

If God told them to do something they would say: I will, sir.

But Jesus indicts them.

He says when you heard John the Baptist preaching, you did not believe and repent.

Why? Because they did not feel the need for repentance.

They did not feel the need for God's salvation through Christ.

The very orderliness and morality of their lives kept them from obeying God on the only point that really matters which is repentance.

There's an old hymn that says:

All the fitness God requires is to know our need of him.

They didn't know their need of God so they missed salvation.

And it's rather stunning to realize that it wasn't a pagan religion that blinded them to their spiritual need, it was a religion based on biblical morality that blinded them.

Which son in the parable are you?

Are you self-righteous or are you repentant?

Are you trusting your moral rectitude or trusting Christ?

Let's look at this parable under these two headings:

1. Jesus' warning to the self-righteous
2. Jesus' encouragement to the sinners

Before we jump in, remember that in a sense these categories aren't water tight.

We are all sinners and we all tend to self-righteousness.

So be open to what the Holy Spirit may be trying to show you about yourself under both of these points.

MP#1 Jesus' warning to the self-righteous

His warning to them is that they are missing God's grace.

Tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. In spite of their many advantages and blessings and even knowledge of Scripture, they were profoundly deluded about their spiritual condition.

You see their delusion in the set up for this parable.

Jesus asked them what they thought about John the Baptist.

They thought John was a fanatic and Jesus knew that's what they thought.

They despised John's message of repentance as much as they despised Jesus.

But they knew it would be unpopular for them to say so, because many of the common people thought John was a prophet.

So they lied and said: We don't know if his teaching was from God or men.

They were the religious leaders of Israel. If they thought John was a fanatic and was dead wrong, then they should have said so even if it was unpopular.

But they didn't because they mostly valued their reputation.

They weren't ashamed of this hypocrisy, they were blind to it.

In Luke 5 passage Jesus describes their condition by saying:

It is not the healthy who need a doctor but the sick.

He wasn't saying that the Pharisees were spiritually healthy.

He was saying that they thought they were healthy.

And as long as they were confident in their own righteousness, then they could not hear his call to repentance and faith.

It's important to know that if you had asked the Pharisees if they ever sinned they would have said yes. They didn't believe they were perfect.

But when they looked in the mirror, they were convinced of their basic goodness.

When I was in high school I knew a girl with anorexia.

Once she was shopping with a friend, trying on bathing suits.

She came out of the dressing room and stood in front of a mirror.

Her friend burst into tears and said: "Shannon, I'm so worried about you."

She replied: "Don't worry, I'll be fine when I lose a little more weight."

That's how self-righteousness operates at a spiritual level.

Profound self-deception.

That means we need to approach this subject with great humility.

So let me give you three diagnostic questions to ask yourself.

1. Do you ever grieve over your sin? Self-righteous people rarely do.

This is where Jesus starts. He says to the religious leaders. You saw the tax collectors and prostitutes repenting when they heard John, but you, Jesus implies, you didn't express the same grief over your sins.

You can imagine their response:

We haven't betrayed our own people like the tax collectors.

We haven't stolen. We haven't extorted.

We haven't been sexually immoral like the prostitutes.

They weren't grieving because they hadn't committed any "big" sins.

They might not have actually said that, but that was how they felt because they defined sin mostly as heinous deeds. The things bad people do.

They did not define sin as thoughts and motives.

So they didn't feel grief for being cold toward God and people, protecting their reputation, coveting, ingratitude, selfishness.

When was the last time you grieved over your hard heart?

When was the last time you grieved because you spoke unloving words?

When was the last time you grieved for judging someone for committing a sin that you yourself have imagined doing?

2. Do you ever do things or stop doing things because of your love for Jesus?

Self-righteous people rarely do.

Instead, other motives drive them, neatness, order, control, respect, comfort.

These motives can lead to an outwardly impeccable life, but if they are not done out of love for Christ they are spiritually worthless.

I remember a time in my life when this hit me like a ton of bricks.

It was when our children were young and I really started to think about the way

I was parenting them and disciplining them.

It stuck me how often I was not motivated to discipline because I cared about their little hearts and wanted them to know God, it was for other reasons.

For me it was mostly about order and peacefulness in the home.

I wanted things to be smooth so that my comfort would not be interrupted.

So I would get on to the kids about making a mess, for example

Other parents might be motivated to discipline by a desire for respect or a desire to be admired by other people and so forth.

Appearances, control, respectability, success, even habit.

Those are all motivations for outwardly obeying biblical morality.

What is the last thing you did because you love Jesus?

What is the last thing you stopped doing because you love Jesus?

3. Do you compare yourself to other people? Self-righteous people often do.

In the parable last week we saw that comparing yourself to other people can make you discontented with your life and estranged from God.

But there's another side to the coin.

Comparing yourself to other people can also estrange you from God by making you satisfied with yourself.

By comparing yourself to other people you are able to say to yourself:

I don't do the bad things they do. So you feel no need to repent.

The Pharisees spoke of two categories "righteous" "sinners."

"Righteous" meant people like them, who took the law seriously.

"Sinners" meant people who didn't.

Jesus adopted their flawed terminology to indict them.

He said: "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

He wasn't agreeing that they actually were righteous.

He was saying: If righteousness is your self-image, and if you enforce that self-image by comparing yourself to people who you think are beneath you morally, then you won't be capable of hearing my call to repentance and salvation.

Are you getting a picture of this spiritual condition?

Are you understanding what it means to be a son who says, I will, sir,
but then who does not obey the father.

The one thing that God wants of you, in fact, you might say the only thing that God wants of you, is repentance that leads to faith in Jesus Christ.

If you miss that, then you miss his grace.

That's Jesus' warning to the self-righteous. Now let's consider . . .

MP#2 Jesus' encouragement to the sinners

The warning is that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.

But the encouragement is that tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God!

What's the deal with tax collectors? Why were they lumped in with prostitutes?

We wouldn't say that about someone we know who works for the Alabama Department of Revenue, or even someone who works for the IRS.

Let's use our reading in Luke 5 as a case study to understand this.

Jesus meets a tax collector named Levi at his tax booth.

And he says to Levi: Follow me.

Which is shorthand for repent of your sins and accept my Lordship over your life.

What do we know about Levi?

He was a Jewish man. He had a very Jewish name.

But he had made a very bad decision at some point in his life that had trapped him in a cycle of sins.

What was his very bad decision?

He decided that he wanted to get rich. That's always a bad move in life.

Historians tell us that tax collectors in that day purchased their office from the Roman government. It was a guaranteed way to get rich.

Tax collectors had the authority of Rome to collect taxes, tolls, and customs.

They had to raise a certain amount for the government.

But anything extra they collected was theirs to keep.

So the system was filled with corruption and extortion.

Judea was under Roman occupation.

So for a Jewish man to pay big bucks to become a tax collector, so that he could squeeze his fellow countrymen, not just for Roman taxes, but so that he could become very rich, that was despicable.

That's the profession Levi had chosen.

Maybe he started out saying to himself that he would be fair and not overdo it.

I'm going to step over this line, but not that line.

But it didn't last. He found himself squeezing people, hurting people.

Remember, that's what the tax collector Zaccheus admitted to Jesus that he had done—cheated people.

Back to Levi. He got rich. Tax collectors lived very well.

He had a big home and all the luxuries.
But as the years went by, there were more moral compromises
And he found himself trapped in the life of his choosing with no way out.
Maybe he tried at times to be honest and change,
but the demand and drive for wealth and power always drew him back.

From that came the condemnation and hatred of many people.
Tax collectors were despised because of their greed, collusion with government.
That's why they were lumped in with prostitutes.
It may have been that Levi's extended family condemned him.
He was a disgrace to his own Jewish people.

He's like someone who today we would call a workaholic.
He sells himself to his work but looks up one day to find his marriage and family
in shambles. He wants to fix it, but all he can do is go back to the office
because that has become his slave master.
Levi's decision ultimately brought him a sad life.
Trapped in a cycle of unethical behavior,
Condemned by many people,
Powerless to change his life.

Perhaps, with different details, you have known this same life.
You made sinful decisions that you were able to justify at the time—
but then, as the years have passed, the consequences start to come home.
Sinful decisions that lead to more sinful decisions.
Attempts to change that lead nowhere.
You find yourself condemned, empty, and powerless to change.

It seems hopeless, but it's not!
That's what's so amazing about the Gospel.
Levi, for all the moral ruin of his life, had one thing the Pharisees didn't have.
He knew his need for salvation.
He knew he had a fatal disease and he wanted a doctor.
And that's exactly where Jesus found him, sitting in his tax collector's booth.

There's a wonderful line in Kent Hughes' commentary:
The first link between my soul and Christ is not my goodness, but my badness;
not my merit, but my misery; not my standing, but my falling; not my riches, but my need."
How does Jesus meet your need? The same two ways he met Levi.
He calls you and he eats with you.

1. When you know your need, Jesus calls you.

Jesus said, “Follow me” and Levi got up and followed him.

Luke actually says Levi left everything and followed him.

Unlike Peter and Andrew, James and John who left their nets to follow Jesus, they went back at times to fish, weren't totally cut off from the family business.

For Levi to leave his tax booth meant that he quit his position.

He left it behind, never to return.

What sort of financial repercussions did this have? We don't know.

But here's the wonderful thing: The call of Jesus gave him the power to change. Probably many times Levi had said, I've got to leave this job, but couldn't.

He was powerless against the grip it had on him.

When Jesus called, call empowered him to change.

That's true for you as well.

Knowing your need, knowing your helplessness is just where Jesus likes to find you, so that he can call you to a new life.

2. When you know your need, Jesus eats with you.

Jesus went to Levi's house and they had a feast.

The house was full of people like Levi, morally compromised people.

Jesus ate with them.

Eating with someone has a symbolism that is virtually trans-cultural.

It signifies at the very least respect for the other person.

But in some cultures, like the world of the Bible, eating with someone was a powerful statement not just that you respected the person, but that you were at peace with them, that you accepted them, that you honored them.

That's what the Lord Jesus was communicating to Levi.

To paraphrase Kent Hughes:

When you know your badness, misery, falling, and need—that's when the Lord Jesus accepts and honors you. And God's people honor you too.

True Christians always rejoice over and honor most those believers who have turned from very visible sins and followed Jesus.

Levi had another name. Do you know his other name?

He was Matthew. That was his Greek name.

He was the disciple who wrote the Gospel of Matthew.

When we open the New Testament, this is the first name we honor.

The tax collector who knew his need and ate with Jesus.

CONC: Jesus has gone to heaven. But he has left us something very precious.

Has given us the Lord's Supper. We're about to come to the Table.

He's has left very specific instructions about who can eat at this Table.

This is a meal for people who know their need for Jesus.

This is a meal for repentant people.

If you are here this morning and you would say about yourself:

I may have done a few bad things, but deep down I'm a good person.

Stay away from this table. It's not for you.

You will eat and drink judgment on yourself.

But if you say: Oh, I've made a mess of things.

The things I've said and done. The people I've hurt. My hypocrisy.

My failures and compromises. They weigh me down.

If that's your heart, then God the Father says: I'm proud of you, son.

You told me no at first, but now you're doing exactly what I wanted you to do.

And the Lord Jesus says: Come to the banquet, let's eat together.

Do you know your need? You must, or you are condemned.

Because it is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick.

Christ did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.